



Understanding and addressing challenges experienced by student youth workers during Work-Integrated Learning in Secure Care Centres in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Student youth workers face severe challenges during Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) at youth residential care centres, in particular, the secure care centres that focus on youth delinquency. This paper is a phenomenological account of eleven female and male student youth workers aged between 22 and 27 on their challenges during WIL Secure Care Centres (SCC). The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling procedure, to select the participants, and semi-structured interviews were administered as a data collection method. The findings of this study revealed that student youth workers are exposed to myriad challenging situations, namely deficient safety and security and insufficient support from their WIL mentors. These challenges compromised the quality and effectiveness of students' experiential learning in a way that a little explanation can help clarify. Consequently, the findings suggested that the challenges faced by student youth workers during WIL hamper their ability to effectively hone their skills and integrate the theory they have learnt in the classroom with real-world situations. This study contributes to the discourse in the fields of youth work, education, and professional development by systematically identifying and highlighting the challenges faced by student youth workers during WIL in the unique context of Secure Care Centres. Lastly, the study recommends the appointment of WIL coordinators by the departments that have WIL programmes within the institutions of higher learning, exposing students to a detailed workplace induction and providing them with counselling during and after WIL, considering the risks they are exposed to as they work with children who have conflicted with the law.

Keywords: *Challenges, Student, Student Youth Worker, Work-integrated Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, WIL is an essential part of student learning, as it combines classroom theory with practical experience. In this context, students enrolled in human science professions are introduced to real-world situations through WIL, strengthening their classroom knowledge and skills while learning the profession's complexities. WIL helps socialise students into the profession and prepares them for their future careers after graduation. Therefore, WIL offers students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience under the guidance and supervision of professionals in their respective fields. Although extensive research has been conducted on social services WIL, there is limited data on the practicum

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in youth work/youth care services.¹ This paper examines the challenges faced by student youth workers during WIL at Secure Care Centres. It highlights that the experiences of student youth workers are not well documented, and the issues they encounter are insufficiently understood or addressed due to a lack of knowledge in the field. This paper makes a valuable contribution to youth work by expanding existing knowledge of the experiences of student youth workers during WIL. It also informs WIL policies in higher education institutions, particularly regarding student workplace exposure and professional development in youth work education and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of WIL in Social Sciences

The concept of WIL is not new and exclusive to the field of human social services; it is also prevalent in other disciplines. In social work, students are expected to play the role of assessing and rehabilitating clients on various issues relating to family problems, personal issues, or rehabilitation of drug addicts or prison inmates, depending on where the student is placed and the services offered there.² The social service profession remains adamant about student WIL despite the raging debate among practitioners, researchers, and scholars over its significance.³ These debates indicate that students do not need to be placed for WIL but rather apply classroom knowledge in the workplace after graduation, as part of applying classroom theory.⁴

The significance of WIL is evident in other disciplines to exemplify the existing skills gap by increasing the number of learnerships, traineeships, and apprenticeships. Learnership is a work-based programme that enables students to qualify in the field. A traineeship is a type of vocational program in which students earn a wage or stipend while learning skills in their field. Apprenticeship refers to a course of training in an industry consisting of theory and practice.⁵ However, in the social sciences, the most widely used programme for integrating theory and practice is WIL, also known as practicum. These programmes integrate educational knowledge with employment opportunities, equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed in the job market.⁶ In this view, integrating theory into practice plays a significant role in students' careers and enhances their employability. This statement includes students enrolled in youth work.

According to Bekink, before democracy in South Africa, the rehabilitation programmes were stratified to only cater for white people.⁷ As a result, many Africans were exposed to risk as the welfare services were in a residual mode, offered only when one had experienced abuse, maltreatment, or neglect. Although welfare services had always been autonomous, many Black people were still sidelined in terms of receiving the services rendered by rehabilitation centres.⁸ This highlights the structural challenges embedded in the system, which prevented equality in the services rendered to the marginalised groups, mainly blacks.

In South Africa, the number of those who are vulnerable to social factors such as HIV/AIDS and other risk factors is rapidly growing, and this calls for intensified social service programmes to curb the risk factors affecting children and youth in communities. These programmes must be conducted by professionals with a strong work ethic and the necessary knowledge and skills to plan and implement social services for children and youth in communities. These professionals who offer rehabilitation services include, among others, social workers, child and youth care workers, youth care workers, and psychologists.

¹ Michael Keough, "Sailing through the Fog: Practicums in Canadian Child and Youth Education," *Writing with Mark: A Cross-Border Conversation about Mark Krueger and His*, 2016, 123.

² Kathryn Hay, "What Is Quality Work-Integrated Learning? Social Work Tertiary Educator Perspectives," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 21, no. 1 (2020): 51–61.

³ Carolyn Gentle-Genitty et al., "Social Work Theory and Application to Practice: The Students' Perspectives," 2014.

⁴ Gentle-Genitty et al., "Social Work Theory and Application to Practice: The Students' Perspectives."

⁵ European Commission., "Facing the Crisis: The Coping Strategies of Unemployed People in Europe." (Publications of the European Union, 2014).

⁶ European Commission., "Facing the Crisis: The Coping Strategies of Unemployed People in Europe."

⁷ Bernard Bekink, *Principles of South African Constitutional Law* (LexisNexis, 2012).

⁸ Bekink, *Principles of South African Constitutional Law*.

In the 1980s, the National Association of Childcare Workers (NACCW) introduced child and youth care work in South Africa. The primary focus of this workforce was control and punishment as methods for modelling the behaviour of the children in the residential facilities.⁹ However, the NACCW network requires the CYCW role to align with children's rights by serving as change agents who provide therapeutic care to children in residential facilities, rather than merely serving as caregivers.¹⁰

As a result, NACCW established training in the basic qualification in childcare. This followed the declaration of the Correctional Services Amendment Act 17 of 1994, which stated that children awaiting trial should not be placed in prison cells but rather in residential facilities of the Department of Social Development or under home arrest in the care of their parents.¹¹ This came about after it was realised that the state is experiencing difficulties in protecting the rights of the children who are in conflict with the law, awaiting trial.¹² This entails that the state provided inadequate legal provisions to the children in police cells, which called for a different approach when dealing with children in conflict with the law, without holding them in police cells where their rights were not fully protected.

In line with the above assertion, student youth workers must be placed in WIL to gain the necessary knowledge and skills in the workplace, as most of them will be working in residential facilities for children who have come into conflict with the law after graduating. This WIL experience enables student youth workers to hone their skills by integrating classroom knowledge with real-world experience. This will improve your chances of being an effective youth worker after graduation. However, when students are placed for experiential learning, they may face a variety of challenges.

According to the Institute of Medicine, students still face challenges despite the popularity and widespread use of WIL.¹³ These challenges include travelling costs, work-related stress, and adapting to the world of work. Therefore, student youth workers may face similar challenges during their WIL. Other challenges that students may encounter include, among other things, cross-cultural communication, ethnic and gender differences, and values in a diverse workplace. The above statement illustrates the need for work-related risks and challenges during WIL. Moreover, the host institutions for students during WIL may also be exposed to challenging situations, requiring them to place students, monitor them, and provide them with feedback as they integrate theory and practice.¹⁴ Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges experienced by student youth workers during WIL, with the intent to develop feasible solutions and strategies to improve students' WIL experience and minimise the challenges they encounter during placements. These challenges may pose a dilemma for students, as feedback is an important aspect of their learning during WIL. Moreover, these challenges affect all stakeholders involved in students' WIL placements, such as academic institutions, host centres, and students.¹⁵ The prevalence of cross-cultural issues among students needs to be addressed at the university level. This is also the case with other universities, and the University of Venda is a multi-racial and multicultural institution. Therefore, some students may encounter language or cultural barriers during WIL, depending on their background and familiarity with the host institution's language and culture. As a result, these challenges may hamper their effectiveness when working with young people at the centre.

Sibisi asserts that young people in secure care centres tend to normalise aggression and violence in their lives due to the historically violent practices prevalent in South Africa.¹⁶ As a result, these

⁹ M. Allsopp, "Child and Youth Care Workers Are Recognised...", *Child and Youth Care Work* 29, no. 4 (2011): 2.

¹⁰ Allsopp, "Child and Youth Care Workers Are Recognised..."

¹¹ Allsopp, "Child and Youth Care Workers Are Recognised..."

¹² Gezu Tadesse, "Impact of Climate Change on Smallholder Dairy Production and Coping Mechanism in Sub-Saharan Africa - Review," *Agricultural Research & Technology: Open Access Journal* 16, no. 4 (June 21, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.19080/ARTOAJ.2018.16.556000>.

¹³ Institute of Medicine, *Educating the Student Body: Taking Physical Activity and Physical Education to School*. (The National Academies Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Nahid Jamshidi et al., "The Challenges of Nursing Students in the Clinical Learning Environment: A Qualitative Study," *The Scientific World Journal* 2016 (2016): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/1846178>.

¹⁵ Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (2020): 97–140.

¹⁶ M. W Sibisi, "Experiences of Probation Officers Working with Children in Conflict with the Law in the Johannesburg Metro Region" (University of Witwatersrand, 2015).

young people put the lives of their caregivers at risk, as these people are expected to take care of those young people in conflict with the law. These risks may also extend to student youth workers during their WIL period in those centres. This means that the safety of the student youth workers may not be guaranteed, as it is difficult to predict the behaviour of the children under their care. As a result, these students may be exposed to individual risks coupled with new learning opportunities.¹⁷ This means that WIL can yield both positive and negative outcomes for all stakeholders involved.

The other challenge portrayed in the literature is sexual harassment in the workplace. It has been discovered that many people are exposed to sexual harassment in the workplace, schools, and homes. According to Cornelio, sexual harassment is any form of unacceptable sexual behaviour directed at another person.¹⁸ This includes sexual remarks made verbally or physically. This covers invasive remarks, exposing others to indecent pictures or videos or threats and expectations of sexual favours. Some employers take advantage of potential employees and demand sexual favours in return for employment or promotion for current employees. This illustrates that student youth workers may be exposed to various forms of harassment during their WIL placement.

According to Stephenson, a common negative challenge across disciplines is inadequate supervision during WIL.¹⁹ Furthermore, some students in nursing and education expressed disappointment with unprofessional attitudes and a lack of a challenging work environment that facilitates growth.²⁰ These students reported inadequate support, poor feedback, and limited opportunities to hone their skills effectively. Therefore, this paper examines the challenges student youth workers experience during WIL, identifies the issues they face, and proposes feasible solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This paper explored the challenges facing student youth workers during WIL at SCCs. This paper used a qualitative research approach to gather in-depth information from the study participants. This approach helped the researcher gather more information on the phenomenon under study.²¹ The significance of the qualitative approach in this study lies in its exploration of reality through participants' lived experiences. Therefore, this approach allowed the research to obtain detailed information on the challenges faced by student youth workers during WIL while allowing the participants to share their own experiences. The study used an exploratory design to understand the experiences of student youth workers. According to Olawale et al., exploratory research is usually conducted in under-researched areas to understand phenomena and elucidate research questions rather than to provide definitive solutions to existing problems.²² The study explored the experiences of student youth workers aged between 18 and 35 years who were placed at Secure Care Centres for 4 months of WIL. The researcher employed non-probability purposive sampling. This sampling method allowed the researcher to assemble the research sample with little or no cost, as the population in this sample does not require representativeness.²³ The purposive sampling method is based on the study researcher's knowledge of the population and involves selecting a small, easily identifiable subset.²⁴ Face-to-face interviews through one-on-one sessions were used as a data collection technique. The intention in using this type of interview was to obtain holistic, first-hand information from the study's primary sources. This type of interview allows the researcher the opportunity to probe where clarity is

¹⁷ Edwin James Thesen, "Challenges Faced by Child and Youth Care Workers with Regard to Discipline of Children with Challenging Behaviour in Residential Child and Youth Care Centre" (University of the Western Cape, 2014).

¹⁸ Diana Cornelio, "Preventative Strategies to Reduce Sexual Harassment Lawsuits Against Restaurants" (University of the Potomac, 2024).

¹⁹ Raymond L. Stephenson, "Students' Descriptions of Attributes That Influence Decision to Participate in Work-Integrated Learning" (Grand Canyon University, 2025).

²⁰ Michael Emslie, "Blood, Sweat and Tears: Youth Work Students on Placement and 'good WIL'," 2009.

²¹ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2014).

²² Saka Rahmon Olawale, Osademe Gloria Chinagozi, and Ononokpono Nyong Joe, "Exploratory Research Design in Management Science: A Review of Literature on Conduct and Application," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 7, no. 4 (2023): 1384–95.

²³ J. Michael Brick, "Explorations in Non-Probability Sampling Using the Web," in *Proceedings of Statistics Canada Symposium*, vol. 2015, 2014.

²⁴ Stephen J Gentles et al., "Sampling in Qualitative Research: Insights from an Overview of the Methods Literature," *The Qualitative Report* 20, no. 11 (2015): 1772–89.

needed.²⁵ Data were analysed using thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for understanding experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set.²⁶ Furthermore, research ethics were considered, with ethical clearance obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee to ensure compliance. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and that their participation was voluntary, giving them the right to withdraw at any stage of the study should they wish not to continue. The participants' privacy and protection from harm were maintained throughout the data collection process. According to Israel, the significance of adhering to research ethics lies in protecting participants, maintaining the integrity of research findings, and building public trust.²⁷ Research ethics further ensure that participants are treated with dignity and respect through informed consent, honesty, and transparency, while also preventing misconduct in methods and data, including data fabrication and plagiarism.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

WIL serves as a platform for students to integrate classroom theory with real-world experience. The study found that student youth workers are exposed to a variety of challenging situations during WIL at centres serving children in conflict with the law. The discussion below focuses on the challenges facing student youth workers during WIL at Mavambe SCC. These challenges include Abnormal working hours or compulsory overtime (12 hours), an unfamiliar environment, impunity for young people with violent behaviour in the Centre, and a Lack of support from the centres and university staff members.

Abnormal working hours or compulsory overtime (12 hours), and an unfamiliar environment

Every organisation or work sector has its working schedule or hours, which may differ from those of other departments, organisations, or sectors. However, there is a minimum working hour stipulated by the labour departments, which many departments and organisations practise. The student youth workers in this study stated that they are subject to irregular working hours at the centre where they are placed for WIL. Therefore, student youth workers were subject to a 12-hour work schedule, like that of the permanent employees at the centre. This was challenging for the students, as they were not used to the schedule and were not informed of the working conditions in advance. However, student youth workers in this study indicated that they were treated equally with staff members, especially regarding work schedules. The following assertions are verbatim quotations from the participants in this study.

P2 "The other thing was the working hours because it was too abnormal as we had to work for 12 hours even on weekends, which we were not made aware of when we started."

P4 "It was a kind of tiring environment where you are dealing with people who have lost hope, and conflict always arose here and there, but it was all manageable, although it takes one with great courage because it is not a normal environment. You are working with young people who have come into conflict with the law and have committed crimes. It was draining a lot, but through strength and courage, I managed to finish my practical."

The findings revealed that the students were exposed to 12-hour shifts, which is considered abnormal. This posed challenges for the students, as they were unaware of the nature of the environment and the work shifts at the centre. Participant 2 further indicated that they were not pre-informed of the nature of the work shifts; hence, it presented challenges for them. The literature indicates that some institutions treat students placed for WIL differently from staff members within the organisation.²⁸

²⁵ Ranjit Kumar, "Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners," 2018.

²⁶ Michelle E Kiger and Lara Varpio, "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data: AMEE Guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 8 (2020): 846–54.

²⁷ Mark Israel, "Research Ethics and Integrity for Social Scientists: Beyond Regulatory Compliance," 2014.

²⁸ Deanna Grant-Smith and Alicia Feldman, "Delivering Quality WIL without Compromising Wellbeing: Exploring Staff and Student Wellbeing in a WIL Context through the Lens of Organisational Health," *Student Success* 14, no. 3 (2023): 78–91.

These abnormal working hours caused severe frustration and were overwhelming for the students. In some institutions, students placed for WIL worked abnormal hours without time off, and in others, overtime was only applicable to students, not employees.²⁹ This highlights a lack of uniformity across disciplines for students' working shifts during WIL.

Impunity for young people with violent behaviour in the Centre

Working with young people who conflict with the law is incredibly challenging, as most of these young people have delinquent behaviours. These young people are usually violent and aggressive toward other people, including their caretakers or workers at the centre. This exposed student youth workers to an extremely critical position, where they worked in fear for their safety or their lives. This is the case because these young people are offenders due to distinct reasons.³⁰ Subsequently, these young people are expected to receive full care and not be punished for misbehaving or causing any harm to employees, including student youth workers. The following are the verbatim quotations from the participants in this study:

P1 "The problem is that those children under our care are in conflict with the law, and sometimes they will tell you how they killed their parents, so when they start to fight with you, you are not allowed to fight back or defend yourself. You are expected to record that in the logbook and submit it to the supervisor so that the psychologist can monitor the progress of that child's behaviour. This makes our lives difficult because you do not know what worse could happen."

P4 "Working with children who conflict with the law is a challenge in itself. You always fear for your life or just your safety because you never know what they think or what they are capable of."

P8 "For student youth workers, it was very tough because those teenagers misbehave too much. You have to be flexible when you are working on that side, because if you lose your temper and fight with them, you will be committing an offence, or rather, violating your job. Even if they can beat you up, you do not have to fight back because you can be arrested for that. It was also traumatising because those children had committed different crimes, and sometimes, they would tell you how they killed other people, including their parents. Sometimes you will be thinking of the danger your life is in."

The findings reveal that students are exposed to risks due to the violent behaviours of the young people under their care, which is exacerbated by impunity for young people behaving unacceptably, threatening the safety of student youth workers. The assertions by the participants in this study quoted above are in line with Sibisi, who contends that most children who conflict with the law have committed petty crimes due to a lack of parental guidance, peer pressure, or substance abuse.³¹ Some of them mimic adults at home who are abusive towards their partners or children, and then these children adopt the behaviour. This highlights the extent to which these young people have normalised violence due to their backgrounds and tend to practise it even at the secure care centres towards people who are providing care services to them.

Lack of support from the centres and the University staff members

The findings of this study revealed that the University never sent the WIL coordinators to monitor students while they are placed for WIL at Mavambe SCC. The following is what some of the participants had to say:

²⁹ Nombeko Felicity Dwesini and Senior Coordinator_ Work-Integrated Learning WIL, "Exploring Key Challenges Encountered by Hospitality Management Students Participating in a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Programme in South Africa," *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 6, no. 2 (2017): 1–10.

³⁰ Sibisi, "Experiences of Probation Officers Working with Children in Conflict with the Law in the Johannesburg Metro Region."

³¹ Sibisi, "Experiences of Probation Officers Working with Children in Conflict with the Law in the Johannesburg Metro Region."

P 5 “The other challenge we encounter is that we do not get any support from the university, and we do not have mentors. The university helps us find a placement, and then they are out; they do not care how we settle in.”

P7 “I think the university does not care about us because we never have one who visits us from the university to check out how we are coping, especially when they know that we are just fresh from the classroom and not familiar with the work environment.”

P 11 “Actually, we are just not cared for by either the university or the Centre where we are placed. The Centre, and particularly its staff members, are glad that we are easing their workload, but they do not appreciate us. And on the other hand, the university does not even bother; all they want is for us to submit the report, they do not even check if one is going for practical daily as expected.”

The findings revealed that a lack of support from staff at placements where students undertake WIL is a problem for students' experiential learning. The Universities also offer limited support to the students during WIL. Insufficient support puts students under duress and undermines their ability to practise and hone their skills.³² The University is also responsible for conducting site visits to the centres where students are placed for WIL.³³ The significance of site visits lies in assessing and monitoring students' progress during WIL. Student youth workers need the support of all the stakeholders involved in the WIL project to practice effectively. The literature indicates that the university should conduct WIL site visits, as these visits enable it to monitor and assess students' progress during WIL. This means that students placed will be monitored and supported throughout the WIL period for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results indicate that the university appears to be struggling with the WIL responsibilities due to staff shortages; therefore, additional staff should be employed, and a WIL coordinator will be responsible for conducting site visits to the centres hosting students for WIL. This recommendation is supported by the DHET Strategic Plan 2025-2030, which highlights the need to build institutional capacity to support student development and experiential learning.

The scope of work needs to be clearly defined for the students before the commencement of the WIL. Students should also be briefed on what to expect from host institutions and what the institutions expect of them. This means that the scope of work needs to be made clear to the students before placement and the commencement of the WIL. The DHET WIL guidelines, as referenced in strategic planning documents, highlight the significance of preparing students for workplace realities.

Since centres host students annually for WIL purposes, they must identify the challenges students face and improve where necessary. This includes providing adequate induction for students and outlining their roles in the centre. The host centres should also consider establishing support groups for students during WIL, as this will help the centres identify the challenges students face and address them accordingly. The Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS) encourages institutions to establish supportive environments that enable youth development and continuous growth.

Providing counselling to students working with young offenders is also imperative for addressing the challenges they encounter in the field. Lastly, safety and security in secure care centres must be improved, not only to protect students during WIL but also to protect the entire population in the centre.

³² Sibisi, “Experiences of Probation Officers Working with Children in Conflict with the Law in the Johannesburg Metro Region.”

³³ Cookie M Govender and Marius Wait, “Work Integrated Learning Benefits for Student Career Prospects–Mixed Mode Analysis,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 5 (2017): 49–64.

CONCLUSION

Work-integrated Learning plays a significant role in students' education, serving as a bridge between classroom theory and real-world situations. This means that WIL benefits not only the students but also the host centres and universities, as it adds value to the education offered and to the quality of the students produced. Despite the challenges students face during WIL, student youth workers in this study confirmed the significance of WIL for their learning as students. It is evident from this study that students are resilient and determined to complete their WIL successfully, regardless of the challenges they face in the host centres. These challenges present not only technical aspects relating to the roles of student youth workers but also emotional dimensions. Therefore, navigating these complexities is a well-rounded approach to students' professional development.

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